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Key Findings:

- Some school districts in Sangamon County have experienced declining enrollment and scarcity of resources in recent years.
- Literature in the educational field suggests that virtual schools and online curriculum offerings in various arrangements offer benefits to students in terms of the amount of college preparatory coursework available to them.
- Some local school districts are already utilizing such online curriculum programs with positive results. The CEC explored the example of Tri-City School District's use of supplemental online curriculum.
- The CEC recommends that local school districts consider cooperatively utilizing online curriculum packages like those already in use, in order to reduce costs and expand educational opportunities.

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Citizens' Efficiency Commission Recommendation: Shared Online Curriculum

Introduction

This report represents a formal recommendation by the Citizens' Efficiency Commission (CEC). Members of the CEC and its research staff have validated information contained in this report. The Commission expresses its hope that relevant local leaders will review the recommendation and take strides toward its implementation.

In light of the research presented below, the CEC recommends that all local school districts consider cooperatively utilizing online curriculum packages like those already in use in some districts, in order to reduce costs and expand educational opportunities.

The Commission is prepared to provide assistance to the greatest extent possible for the review and implementation of these recommendations. The CEC may be interested in further efficiency considerations that develop based on this advisory report.

Background Information

Because a large portion of local government expenditures are made by school districts, because educational costs are rising, and because school districts' attempts at cooperation and consolidation have substantial potential to impact citizens' lives, the CEC felt compelled in its work to explore efficiency and effectiveness options available to the school districts that are fully or partially located within Sangamon County.

In conversations with a number of local and statewide education officials, the CEC learned that school consolidation questions are often driven only when no other financial resources remain, and have a tendency to be complex and costly.¹ The CEC did not feel that its time was best spent in pursuing consolidation options, but chose instead to explore other possibilities for reducing costs and improving educational effectiveness in the region.² Short of consolidation, there are other resources available to schools for reducing costs and improving students' educational opportunities. The CEC first reviewed pupil transportation and opportunities to increase collaboration with public transit providers, and then began to explore technological resources.³ In this process, the CEC identified some practices in the region that could be expanded or shared by other school

¹ "Classrooms First Commission: A Guide to P-12 Efficiency and Opportunity" (July 2012). Lieutenant Governor Sheila Simon's Classrooms First Commission.; CEC Interview with Dr. Robert Gillum, former Superintendent, Ball-Chatham CUSD #5 (April 19, 2012).; CEC Interview with Doug Whitley, President and CEO, Illinois Chamber of Commerce (January 9, 2013).

² Erwin, Cliff (September 30, 2013). "Assessing Government Efficiency a Complex Task." *The State Journal-Register*.

³ Citizens' Efficiency Commission (August 21, 2013). "Public Transit and School District Cooperation." Available at: <http://www.co.sangamon.il.us/Departments/RegionalPlanning/documents/CEC/Transit-Pupil%20Transportation%20White%20Paper.pdf>

districts to increase efficiency and effectiveness. The CEC documented these opportunities below and has recommended a number of actions that other local school districts can take to expand these practices.

Efficiency Research Questions

As it pursued its research, the CEC asked questions such as:

- How might school districts in Sangamon County increase their effectiveness in providing excellent educational experiences for students?
- What are the most cost-efficient models for offering advanced classes that meet university entrance requirements and students' personal enrichment needs?

Overview of Existing Services and Challenges

There are currently 14 school districts located fully or partially within Sangamon County, in addition to a number of other private schools. The total enrollment and spending per student figures are provided for these districts in Table 1, below.

Table 1: Sangamon County School District Summary
(*italicized districts are located primarily in neighboring counties*)

District	Enrollment	All Subjects Meets/Exceeds (%)	Instructional Expenditure per Pupil (\$)	Operational Expenditure per Pupil (\$)
<i>A-C Central CUSD 262</i>	497	79.1	3,798	8,254
<i>Athens CUSD 213</i>	1,128	76.6	4,046	7,708
Auburn CUSD 10	1,498	81.7	4,192	7,226
Ball-Chatham CUSD 5	4,525	86	5,153	9,310
New Berlin CUSD 16	890	83	4,557	9,040
<i>North Mac SD 34</i>	1,643	76.6	5,042	8,779
Pawnee CUSD 11	626	85.8	4,158	7,355
Pleasant Plains CUSD 8	1,326	86.8	5,071	8,738
Riverton CUSD 14	1,553	77.1	3,952	7,594
Rochester CUSD 3A	2,333	89.1	3,954	8,184
<i>Sangamon Valley CUSD 9</i>	782	78.5	5,311	9,296
Springfield SD 186	14,328	67.6	7,094	12,726
Tri-City CUSD 1	582	79.5	4,465	8,300
Williamsville CUSD 15	1,454	87.8	4,351	7,543

A number of these districts are smaller and more rural in nature, and therefore face challenges associated with declining enrollment and revenues. Challenging economic climates and reduced household incomes are also probably contributors to these difficulties. This has led to a number of referenda in recent years in an attempt to increase or supplement revenue sources.⁴ Since these referenda have not always been successful, cost-cutting measures in some district have become necessary.

⁴ Petrella, Dan (May 6, 2012). "Auburn school district considering second referendum try." *The State Journal-Register*.



Although revenue shortages manifest themselves in many operational difficulties, the CEC chose to focus specifically on concerns related to curriculum offerings, because of the importance of providing all students opportunities to engage in a full spectrum of needed college-preparatory courses. Currently, some school districts in the State of Illinois must take advantage of online programs in order to full set of curricular offerings needed for college applications.⁵

Curriculum Offerings

Generally speaking, smaller school districts have difficulty in offering the same diversity of curricula that are found in other districts. Limited staff members can preclude the opportunity for unique, non-core, or advanced courses in some instances. Smaller schools can struggle to provide students the enrichment courses needed to meet entrance requirements for college coursework.

The CEC learned that one school district in Sangamon County that has pressing concerns in this area is Tri-City Community Unit School District #1. Tri-City includes students that live in Buffalo, Dawson, and Mechanicsburg and has relatively low enrollment numbers. Accordingly, Tri-City has experimented in recent years with online curriculum alternatives in order to expand the opportunity set available to its students while maintaining low personnel and curriculum costs.

In conversation with Tri-City, the CEC learned that key concerns in expanding and developing curriculum alternatives include a need for the technology to support student online learning, professional development for faculty necessary to provide adequate instruction in this alternative environment, and system assessment and expertise to ensure that any implemented program is effective.

Best Practices and Examples

The CEC found that increased use of technology in the classroom setting is considered a best practice as a supplemental component to current education systems by many in the field. One study notes that, in order to address a lack of curriculum alternatives, which can be a serious concern for students desiring to have competitive college applications, a rapid increase in virtual schools and online course offerings has occurred over the last several years.⁶ Specifically in the area of supplemental curriculum, the CEC has preliminarily explored a number of alternatives:

- 1) Online learning vendors offer a host of private high school curriculum alternatives. For examples, see <http://aventalearning.com/curriculum>.
- 2) State-sanctioned, state-level courses, such as the Virtual Schools program provided through the Illinois State Board of Education. For more information, see <http://www.ilvirtual.org/>
- 3) Independent study through online college curriculum. For examples, see <http://is.byu.edu/site/> or other e-campus websites.

⁵ Personal communication from Jeff Vose, Regional Superintendent of Schools, Regional Office of Education #51 (October 25, 2013).

⁶ Aronson, Julie Z. and Mike J. Timms (n.d.). "Net Choices, Net Gains: Supplementing High School Curriculum with Online Courses." *WestEd*; Miller, Jennifer (n.d.). "Flipped Out." *Spirit Magazine*. Available at: http://www.spiritmag.com/features/article/flipped_out/.



These alternatives are available as offerings to supplement local schools' curriculum resources, particularly when school finances, faculty resources, or scheduling conflicts do not allow high schools to provide a full array of courses.

Additionally, local study through Lincoln Land Community College can allow students supplemental curriculum offerings or provide the ability for students to utilize their time in high school to work ahead at the college level. Lincoln Land classes are available on-ground or on-line as a supplement to high school courses. For more information, see <http://www.llcc.edu/>.

All of these alternatives have advantages and benefits that local school districts should explore. This listing provides only a preliminary springboard for further exploration of these concepts and alternatives.

Local Virtual Schools Program Use

The CEC learned that a number of schools in Sangamon County have partnered with Illinois Virtual Schools (IVS) in the last three years, typically to supplement existing courses or fill unique needs through limited enrollments. These schools included: Auburn High School, Pleasant Plains High School, Riverton High School, Springfield - Iles Elementary, Tri-City High School, and Williamsville High School. Currently, only Riverton and Auburn are utilizing the IVS system.⁷

Local Case

As a local example, after exploring options available via the Illinois Virtual Schools program and other private curriculum vendors, Tri-City selected a program called Aventa to provide credit recovery opportunities for students who were unable to pass classes during their first course enrollment, who desired to take classes that were either not offered at the school, or who desired classes that could not be included in the student's schedule due to limited staffing. This program allows Tri-City access to 154 online classes with unlimited seats for approximately \$27,000.⁸ With some increased expenses for personnel training, the program ultimately resulted in under \$50,000 in total costs for the district. Tri-City's Board has currently approved 75 of these programs, including calculus and 7th and 8th grade reading.

Through their curriculum software, all Tri-City teachers were trained during the current academic year to facilitate classes, and can supervise a number of students taking different classes simultaneously. Having this system in place allows for courses to be available to students that otherwise may not be available for their schedules. Tri-City notes that the 75 approved courses are those where Tri-City instructors are available for facilitation. However, the full spectrum of courses in the Aventa curriculum program cannot be offered to students with Tri-City instructors, so students must bear the additional instruction cost for these courses.⁹

There are other benefits in using the curriculum as well. Tri-City experiences reduced textbook costs through the curriculum, as textbooks were continually becoming outdated and needing replacement, in contrast to the curriculum. Students could also utilize a "Join

⁷ Personal communication from Maria Gottschalk, Learning Management Specialist, Illinois Virtual School (October 19, 2013).

⁸ CEC Interview with Dustin Day, Principal, Tri-City CUSD #1 (August 14, 2013).

⁹ Personal communication from Dustin Day, Principal, Tri-City CUSD #1 (October 30, 2013).



Me" app to observe and participate in classes from their personal devices at home in the event that they are ill.

In the course of its research, the CEC visited Tri-City to experience one such online classroom learning experience. In this case, students from Tri-City were receiving Spanish language instruction using the Aventa curriculum. Students at Tri-City provided mixed reports of their enjoyment of the courses, and indicated that at times technological issues can be problematic. Although most students reported to the CEC that they favored the courses, some resistance has also surfaced as a result of the increased individual responsibility placed on students. Some students also voiced that they missed interaction with teachers at the level available prior to the transition to Aventa. However, overall the system appeared to be functioning well and allowing students opportunity to engage in college-preparatory coursework which they might not otherwise have opportunity to complete.

Obstacles to Implementation & Important Considerations

There are a number of significant considerations that the CEC finds important to address in exploring curriculum alternatives. First and foremost, local school districts should consider software and programs that promote quality education. Literature in the field indicates that important factors in considering online curriculum quality include pedagogical approach, content standards, student support, assistance to students in developing skills for online course success, necessary technological support, and secure and effective communication systems.¹⁰

Teachers may also need training to develop the skills required for facilitating technological learning. Although some virtual schools provide teachers, typically at more substantial cost to the district, others rely on local teachers to facilitate. The literature suggests that clear communication and frequent writing assignments are often important to assisting student in developing an assessable voice in their online learning. Adaptation on the part of teachers and motivation and time on the part of school-based coaches are essential.¹¹

Finally, start-up costs are typically relatively high. Tri-City's programming allows unlimited curriculum access to over 150 courses for under \$30,000, but some additional salary costs may be incurred for the teachers or coaches helping to facilitate classes.¹² Targeted assessment of needs and funding is essential, and the CEC encourages local school districts to undertake these efforts in cooperation with one another.

Alternatives

Several options are available on a region-wide basis related to supplemental curriculum materials and online learning. These alternatives include:

Alternative 1—Maintain the status quo. As in many of the CEC's recommendations, the status quo in this case will likely not continue to be viable. With reduced enrollment in rural schools and budgetary shortfalls, schools in Sangamon County may struggle to have instructional

¹⁰ Aronson, Julie Z. and Mike J. Timms (n.d.). "Net Choices, Net Gains: Supplementing High School Curriculum with Online Courses." *WestEd*.

¹¹ Aronson, Julie Z. and Mike J. Timms (n.d.). "Net Choices, Net Gains: Supplementing High School Curriculum with Online Courses." *WestEd*.

¹² CEC Interview with Dustin Day,, Principal, Tri-City CUSD #1 (August 14, 2013).



resources to adequately prepare students with the college preparatory courses they need. The CEC finds it unacceptable to disadvantage students in rural areas for these reasons, and urges school districts to explore alternatives. While some are already doing so, this is not occurring on a coordinated regional basis.

Alternative 2—Explore online curriculum opportunities available as a region. This option allows the benefits of what is already occurring in relation to supplemental curriculum to be expanded to other areas of the region. The CEC acknowledges that not all districts may need or benefit from the supplemental programs, but finds that programs should be explored locally. Opportunities for economies of scale or expertise sharing should be identified and pursued.

Alternative 3—Pursue other cost reduction mechanisms, such as shared administrators or school consolidation. The CEC acknowledges that the current recommendation is limited in scope, and addresses only curricular offerings. However, other mechanisms for strengthening educational opportunities by reducing costs may also exist. Some of these, such as shared administrators, are explored in the Classrooms First Commission recommendation, and should be further explored by local districts.

Recommendations

In light of this research, the CEC recommends that local school districts consider cooperatively utilizing online curriculum packages like those already in use, in order to reduce costs and expand educational opportunities.

The benefits of implementing the two recommendations detailed above include:

- Increased educational offerings for students;
- Utilization of technologies to maintain lower personnel costs in small districts; and
- Potential for economies of scale through regional software collaboration.
- Potentially reduced recurring textbook costs.

Advanced Coursework & Potential Benefits

Online classes provide further benefits in that they may be utilized to supplement the advanced coursework offerings available to students interested in additional enrichment or college preparatory coursework. Particularly toward the end of their high school careers, some advanced students desire additional classes beyond those available in their schools' existing curriculum. Often, these students' needs are related to college preparatory aspirations. Some options already exist that allow students to gain college credits while still in high school, including Advanced Placement classes (AP), dual credit opportunities, and dual enrollment at their high school and an online or local junior college. Additionally, some high schools allow the benefits of early graduation for their students.¹³

The CEC learned, however, these opportunities are not available in all districts. Some schools do not offer early graduation to their students. Others limit the number of dual enrollment credits that students can earn, sometimes due to state and federal reporting requirements for student attendance that play an important role in determining the per pupil financial resources the school district is provided.¹⁴ Finally, some districts do not have the resources or

¹³ Personal communication from Shannon Fehrholz, Regional Office of Education (November 14, 2013).

¹⁴ Personal communication from Shannon Fehrholz, Regional Office of Education (November 14, 2013).; CEC Interview with Dustin Day,, Principal, Tri-City CUSD #1 (August 14, 2013).



the volume of advanced students that make it financially feasible to offer AP courses or dual credit, particularly because of the increased stringency of requirements related to dual credit offerings and teacher qualifications that are in place in order to ensure that students' dual credit experiences are of collegiate-level value.¹⁵

In spite of financial hurdles to school districts, dual credit, dual enrollment, AP courses, and other supplemental options for advanced students have opportunity to provide great value to students and the community by allowing them to ultimately reduce costs related to their college education. These supplemental advanced offerings enhance high school curriculum and expose students to more rigorous, college-level coursework. They also address students' unique interests and improve their transition experience from high school to college.¹⁶

Because of these benefits, while somewhat peripheral to the current recommendation, the CEC found these matters of interest. The CEC encourages local districts to review their policies related to these issues to ensure that student advancement is at the core of these policies, and examine opportunities discussed in the existing recommendation with an eye for whether online curricula can be used to provide supplemental curricula for advanced students as well.

Steps toward Implementation

In order to implement this recommendation, the CEC recommends that the following course of action would be beneficial:

- Develop an inventory of current online offerings in school district in Sangamon County and the surrounding region.
- Utilize cooperative bodies such as School Masters group to advertise these opportunities or address potential to expand online curriculum use.
- Explore avenues through which collaboration on these programs could be expanded via intergovernmental agreement and shared procurement.

The CEC offers its support for these implementation efforts. If the CEC can provide any further assistance in facilitating efforts toward cooperation, it would be pleased to do so.

Respectfully submitted,

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¹⁵ 110 ILCS 27/.

¹⁶ Personal communication from Dr. Charlotte Warren, President, LLCC (November 14, 2013).